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Subject: You should read this

INVESTIGATIVE POST

Feds pull plug on radioactive remediation

By Dan Telvok

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Federally funded work to remove radioactive gravel from numerous hotspots in Niagara County has run out of money and come to a halt.

Left in limbo are property owners in Niagara Falls and Lewiston, who were told by Environmental Protection Agency officials that there is no firm date of when – or whether – they will return to finish the clean up.

Eric Daly, the EPA's project manager, said he gave his superiors "options of what I could do and what I needed to do."

"What came back to me was we want you to shut down, meaning trailers out everything done. We don't have the money and they have to figure it out," he said.

There's a lot of unfinished work.

The EPA planned to remove radioactive gravel under a parking lot shared by Rapids Bowling and Greater Niagara Building Center off Niagara Falls Boulevard in Niagara Falls. While some material was removed, 44,000 tons of radioactive gravel remain. The cost of completing the work is an estimated \$8 million.

Owners of the two businesses declined comment.

Seven miles away in Lewiston, another \$3 million is needed to clean-up Holy Trinity Cemetery, where state and federal officials discovered radioactive hotspots at levels more than 75 times higher than normal for the local environment.

The EPA fenced in the contaminated sections, but clean up hasn't started. Cemetery administrators said they are "very disappointed" that the work is suspended and urged "the current administration to provide the level of funding needed" to complete the job.

"While we understand the reason for erecting fences around the areas in question, it is now frustrating that families coming to visit this place of rest will have to see the fences for an indefinite period of time," Holy Trinity administrators said in a prepared statement.

Meanwhile, the EPA is still trying to figure out what to do with two properties across the street from the cemetery, along with a residential driveway on Upper Mountain Road, all of which may be contaminated.

“It looks like I am in a standstill with my house in selling it,” said John Raymond, whose property is across from the cemetery.

The EPA last spring installed a mitigation system in Raymond’s basement to remove radon, a potent radioactive gas linked to lung cancer. Although radon is a naturally occurring gas that can seep into homes, EPA officials said it is possible radioactive gravel caused the spike that’s three times higher what EPA considers safe levels.

EPA documents show that Raymond’s neighbor, Harry Wade, has radioactive gravel under his driveway at least five times higher than normal for the local environment.

Wade said he recently got engaged and had plans to sell his home, but believes his property is “worthless.”

“[The EPA] told me they are packing up, they’re leaving and they probably won’t be back until after this administration is out of there,” Wade said. “I feel hopeless.”

U.S. Rep. Brian Higgins, whose district includes Niagara Falls, said he planned to contact the EPA.

“I don’t know that they are lacking budget resources,” Higgins said. “I think it’s an attitude from this administration to de-prioritize these kinds of things, which is wrong.”

Decades-old problem

State health and environmental regulators have known for decades that at least 62 properties – most in Niagara County – contain varying degrees of radioactivity that tested at levels two to more than 10 times normal for the local environment.

The state Department of Health has long maintained that the radioactive material does not pose a “significant public health impact that would require immediate remediation.” As a result, the state never cleaned up any of those properties.

In 2013, the departments of Health and Environmental Conservation referred three of those contaminated properties in Niagara County to the EPA to investigate. They include the parking lot off Niagara Falls Boulevard, Holy Trinity Cemetery and the residential driveway on Upper Mountain Road. EPA officials three years later discovered contamination in Wade’s driveway and possibly under Raymond’s home.



EPA fenced in contaminated land at Holy Trinity in April 2016

The EPA is not certain who is responsible for the radioactive waste. Its legal team continues to investigate.

State and federal records reviewed by Investigative Post indicate the radioactive gravel, which the government calls “slag,” could be waste generated by metallurgical companies in Niagara Falls that are no longer in operation. The material was used for bedding under asphalt or as gravel under streets, driveways and parking lots.

“Long-term exposure to that could be a health risk,” Daly told Investigative Post earlier this year.

But this radioactive material may be more commonplace than what government agencies had originally thought.

In February, Investigative Post reported that two reports done by a private investigator almost four decades ago raised concerns that the contamination could be more widespread in yards, roads, parking lots and driveways throughout Niagara County.

One of those reports said half the parking lots in Niagara Falls could have been paved with industrial waste from Union Carbide, a company that is the target of an EPA investigation into the source of the radioactive waste. Union Carbide officials have denied any responsibility for the waste.

Funding problems

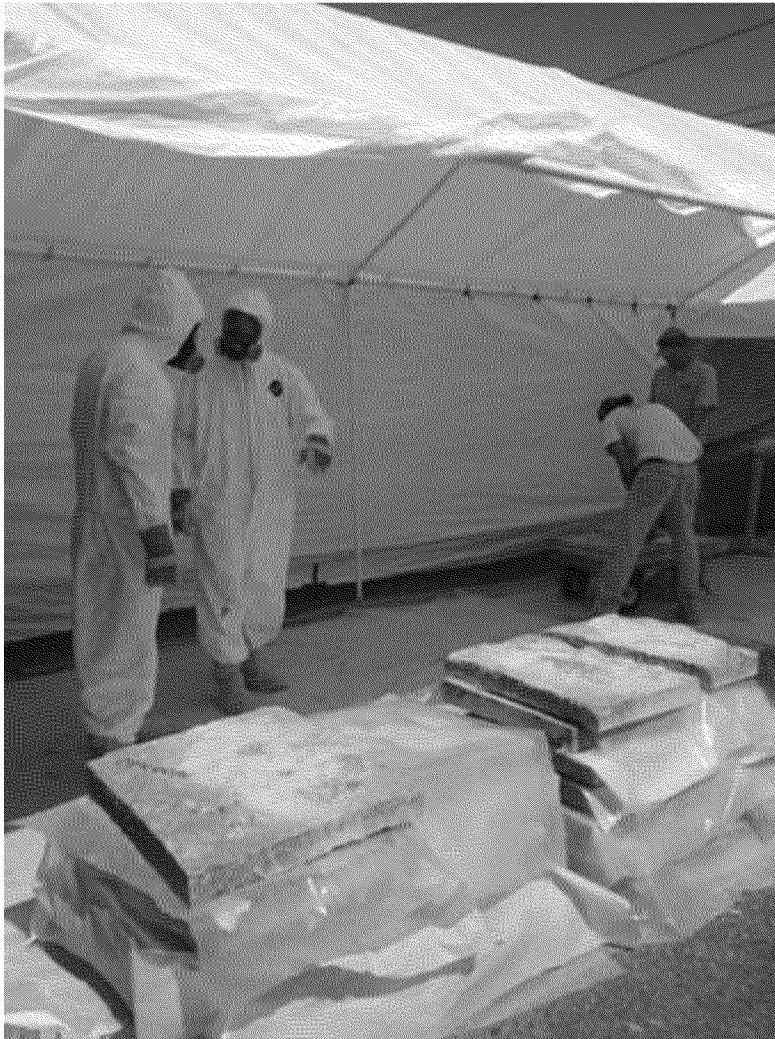
Daly said the EPA has authorized cleanups at the Niagara Falls Boulevard parking lot and Holy Trinity Cemetery. That’s the good news, he said.

“We have deemed them worthy of removal,” Daly said. “So it’s not that it’s not going to get

done.”

The bad news is the EPA provided no certainty on when it would return. Affected property owners said they were told privately by EPA officials that they may not return under President Donald Trump’s administration, which has been hostile to the EPA’s mission.

The office of EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt did not respond to calls and emails seeking comment.



Contractors removed some radioactive waste under a parking lot off Niagara Falls Boulevard.

Daly explained that the work in Niagara County far exceeded his budget and it’s not uncommon for the EPA to pause work until it can secure more funding.

For example, he said a typical job under his program might take less than a year to complete and cost less than \$2 million. The cleanup at the Niagara Falls Boulevard parking lot and Holy Trinity Cemetery was estimated to cost as much as \$11 million.

“The agency was supposed to come up with a plan on how to fund these sites outside our regional budget,” Daly said. “There was a workgroup put together to figure this out. Bottom line is they don’t have enough to do what I wanted to do for this site at Niagara Falls Boulevard. I am not even able to start Holy Trinity.”

‘Fighting losing battle’

The uncertainty has affected property owners.

Raymond said he was unsuccessful in protesting his property tax assessment.

“I was fighting a losing battle,” he said.

Wade is unsure what he will do.

“I feel very stuck,” he said.

Neither Daly nor EPA’s Western New York spokesman Michael Basile could provide a definitive date for the EPA’s return.

“Someone needs to answer that and it’s above our powers to get these answers at this point,” Daly said.

“I’m not going to place blame here or there, it’s an agency-wide issue for funding these types of sites,” he said. “There has to be a solution.”